



ready to play

**finalizer
(orphan_account)**

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Summary:

Love at first sight was real, it was ginger, and it was standing not two feet away from him, on the other side of the counter.

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Author's Note:

can i get uuuuuuuuh kinkshamed

Days like these were the worst: the sun shone brightly through the spotless glass of the front windows, rays of sunshine dripping inside the cafe and engulfing the glossy tiles and rickety tables with their radiant warmth.

To most, it was a *beautiful day*. To him, a nuisance. There was something far more alluring about the world when it rained, when the sky was overcome with gray clouds: twisting and winding in the wind, sheets of raindrops pattering down onto the pavement, enveloping the streets in a murky embrace. He preferred it gloomy, so what.

The upside, he thought, as he tapped his long, dark fingertips atop the counter in an erratic melody, was the clients seemed to disperse when the sun came out, with *oohs* and *ahhs*, and breathless talk of how the weather was too pleasant to stay indoors a moment longer.

This way, he was nearly alone in the cafe. A couple of young boys lingered, bent over the big table in the back of the room, pointing at a hand-drawn map with great fervor. It was likely a matter of minutes before they too got up and left, to go explore whatever it was they had planned out so carefully with their crayons and wrinkled sheets of poster paper.

And he would wait, bored out of his right mind, for the next drop of rain, the next foggy morning to send customers his way, sheltering themselves from the downcast skies with steaming lattes and creatively decorated mugs of hot chocolate.

His coworkers called him Dookie. It was far from creative, really — a play on his too-long, too-hard-to-pronounce name that'd stuck around from the moment he'd gotten the job. Not that he minded: he worked most morning shifts alone, rearranging freshly baked pastries in the display windows, often watching the tired, solemn faces of early

commuters with his own brand of curious fascination. None of them were ever particularly interesting, with their downturned lips and dark circles, zombie walking to the counter and back out the door. The rusty jingle of the bell would announce their departure, and Dookie would be left alone once more, to daydream, to contemplate everything and anything that crossed his mind. However melodramatic it sounded, he considered himself an old soul, a daydreamer and a philosophical poet of sorts: something too intricate, too farfetched for the throngs of ordinary people around him to understand.

“Hey, I’m talking to you.”

Dookie blinked, torn out of his thoughts by the shrill words of an unfamiliar voice. He looked up, his hair obscuring the world from view for a split second as he straightened up to his full height, elbows sore from leaning against the counter in a haze for far too long.

One of the boys, a raggedy one with too-large glasses, was peering up at him with great impatience, the wrinkly crayon-drawn map in hand. He tilted his head in question, as if to ask Dookie if he was thoroughly done daydreaming on the job, and ready to be of service once more. The child, even at first glance, was blatantly and infernally disagreeable.

“What is it?” Dookie finally asked. He was soft spoken, most of the time, but it was hard to be polite to pesky children, not to mention the town nuisances.

“You’ve lived here a while, huh? Haven’t you?” the boy demanded, and steamrolled on without waiting for a proper reply. He unfurled one end of the map onto the empty countertop beside the cash register. “If we were to walk along the river like this, past this and this duct, would we get to the sewage plant? M’just — curious.”

Mildly concerned, but internally amused, Dookie eyed the map, silently impressed at the accuracy of the shaggy Crayola squiggles. The kids had their faults, but their eye for detail was not to be trifled with.

“I guess so,” he said, “not that you have any business rummaging

around those parts. The river and most its tributaries float directly towards the plant, for cleaning — if you must know.”

The kid snatched the map away, grinning lopsidedly. “Just curious, I said. Purely scientific inquiry. Thank you *ever so much* for your assistance, oh gloomy-doomy dark one.”

He turned, and shot a big thumbs up towards his awaiting friends in the back of the room, and within seconds — following a series of ear-numbing scrapes of wood on tile — they were packed and out the door, undoubtedly headed directly for the sewage plant that they’d asked about *sheerly out of curiosity*.

Dookie didn’t understand children, nor did he want to. The town was an eerie one, the crime rate low but the disappearance rate skyrocketing past regional averages. And still, there they were, those impossible kids, laughing and skipping off to the most dangerous, most secluded place they could have selected. It was their choice, ultimately, if they wanted to go play Jedi on the creaking beams by the entrance to the sewage plant, and end up kidnapped, dragged into the void kicking and screaming by whoever it was that’d snatched away the previous three children that month alone.

Not that Dookie was afraid — he was a tall guy, lanky but of intimidating stature, dark and menacing when the situation called for it. He worked morning shifts on the weekdays and volunteered at the community center on weekends, helping soccer moms and middle-aged ladies with their arts and crafts endeavors. He’d don his favorite hat and walk home alone afterwards, listening to the whistling wind and rustling trees; acutely aware of the clack of his heavy boots against the pavement. He’d unlock his apartment door at the end of a dimly lit corridor, the overhead lights blinking and buzzing like they would in a cheap horror flick, and he’d lock them behind himself in complete silence.

He was alone, but he wasn’t lonely. Most of his life he’d spent in solitude, and he’d grown accustomed to the tranquility that came with it.

Which was why it surprised him, roughly thirty minutes after the group of children had gone, when a lone customer entered the cafe

with the telltale jingle of cheerful bells, how much he suddenly wanted that to change.

The melodrama made a comeback, but Dookie dismissed the accusation his mind hurled at him, because love at first sight was *real*. He knew, in that moment, that it wasn't a fairytale spun for children, for little girls and boys wondering about their knight in shining armor, about their beautiful princess. It was real, and he no longer wanted to be alone.

The front door creaked and the bells twinkled, and Dookie looked up from the foaming machine only to see the most beautiful man he'd ever laid eyes upon. He was tall, not quite taller than himself, but sex on legs regardless: donned in a suit with a silvery dress shirt underneath. His hair — Dookie held back a wholly inappropriate gasp — was a brilliant shade of copper, glossy and nearly glittering in the sunlight. Suddenly, Dookie had a newborn appreciation for all things bright and shiny.

Most eye-catching of all, of course, was the bundle of striking red balloons the stranger was tugging along by a tangled mess of white string, struggling to fit through the door of the cafe.

Dookie was openly staring, mouth agape and quivering, but there was no one around to accuse him of improper workplace conduct. He could watch, heart eyed, to his heart's desire.

Until, of course, the stranger managed to pull the balloons inside in one piece, and stumbled for a moment before approaching the counter with a cautious, self-conscious smile. Dookie could feel his heart hammering in his chest, and wondered for a split second, if the beautiful man in front of him could hear it too.

"I — " the stranger began, and immediately stumbled over his words in a way that was too endearing to bear. Dookie swallowed. "My neighbor's daughter has a birthday today. So, I — they asked me to bring these," he explained for the sake of it, and looked up at his balloon bouquet. "They're pretentious and awful, so they wanted helium balloons, and then they said I had to wear a suit, too, so I don't look like a mess, and I had to run to get this thing dry cleaned and pressed, and I had to find a place that carried helium balloons —

all red of course, damn *pretentious* — and I'm — sorry. Sorry, I'm so tired. Can I get, um, something strong, I don't know what."

Love at first sight was real, it was ginger, and it was standing not two feet away from Dookie.

He snapped out of it before he could come across as comatose.

"Uh. Yes, of course. The classic option would be the, uh, espresso. Double espresso, if you're desperate. Then there's the latte, macchiato, or cappuccino, all espresso-based but far sweeter. I can double the shot, too."

The stranger nodded, a curl of that sunlit hair falling out of its impeccable sweep. Dookie tried not to whine.

"Sweet. Yes, sweet, please. Something that wakes me up but isn't bitter. I'm not even a huge fan of coffee, I'm just — exhausted. Surprise me."

Dookie's rampant thoughts flashed through his mind — *hell, I could surprise you all right, get down on one knee with a golden-glazed donut, pretend it's a ring, and tell you I fell in love with you the moment you stepped inside.*

Instead, Dookie nodded. "Cappuccino's my favorite to make. Also, the sweetest. It's double espresso but I'll add stuff to it so it doesn't even taste like coffee, if you want."

The stranger offered a gorgeous smile. His lips looked as red as candied apples in the cafe lighting. "Yes, *please* — to go," he said, stumbling over his words much like he'd stumbled over the front stoop minutes before. With his free hand, he dug into his back pocket and fished out a couple of wrinkled bills and a few quarters, dropping them onto the countertop with a flick of his pale wrist. " — thanks so much."

Dookie rang him up, pressing at the register buttons too harshly with fingers that he only now realized were trembling. This crush thing sucked, he decided, and got to making the coffee as the ethereal stranger waited patiently by the counter, looking like something out

a picture book: much too pretty to be real. His eyes were sunken and his aristocratic cheekbones high and sharp, and his visibly tired demeanor added to the mysterious visage. The hair was a striking contrast, bringing color to his person, as did the ostentatious balloons, floating in the air, bouncing against each other, casting pinkish shadows over the nearby surfaces.

The espresso machine dripped into the paper cup Dookie had prepared, as he foamed the milk, staring at the frothy bubbles with a madman's intensity. A part of him wanted to reverse time and stop the stranger from ever entering the cafe, so that he'd be free of his plaguing, lovesick thoughts. On the other hand, quite contradictory, he wanted to ask the stranger's name, to write his own number on the cup and pray to the high heavens that the stranger would notice it and call.

Dookie was quiet. He was reserved and uncertain on good days, never one for spontaneity or rushes of adrenaline. It was all new to him: the aching ribcage, the magnetic pull towards something so new and alluring.

He grabbed the cinnamon shaker and added a few finishing touches to the order, before turning back to face the balloon-bearing beauty.

"Here," he said softly, instinctively adding the customary, "have a good one."

The man's lips quirked upwards in a smile and he nodded his head in thanks and turned to go.

Something inside him — desperate and longing — snapped, and Dookie opened his mouth.

"I — " he started, and trailed off in a panic as the stranger glanced back at him with an inquisitive look. "Sorry. Never mind."

Those bright eyes narrowed gently, brows furrowing. Dookie noted, curious, that the stranger's voice was laced with a familiar distress. "No, what is it?"

It was almost as if the stranger knew what Dookie was about to say,

and was aching to hear the words himself.

“I was — do you want to go out sometime?” Dookie forced the words out before he could stop himself. In that moment, he knew he had to: the draw towards the inevitable was too strong to resist. “Not coffee, if you don’t like coffee. We have tea here, too. Or not here. Anywhere, really, you can choose.”

The stranger’s smile widened, comically relieved. “Yeah. I’d love that. Of course. I — I’m sorry, I’m running late, but I really would like to. I’ll swing around sometime soon, I promise.”

Dookie thought his heart was going to melt through his ribcage and fall out of his chest, slide across the tiled flooring with a desperate whine.

“Okay,” he said dumbly. “I — I work mornings. I’m looking forward to it.”

The stranger’s excited smile was possibly the most enticing thing Dookie had ever seen.

With his coffee in one hand, the stranger maneuvered the front door open with the other, making sure not to tangle the balloon strings in his palm. As if on a side-note, he poked his head back inside before disappearing into the street.

“I’m Penny, by the way.”

And then he was gone, and Dookie tried his damndest not to sink to the ground in a gooey puddle. He preferred his world gloomy, yes, but he figured he could make an exception for one dazzling smile, for a shining ray of copper hair to brighten the day.

Author's Note:

have no doubt — penny is 100% the serial killer
hunting children around town

(so who's gonna draw the fanart)

+ [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

title from ruelle's *game of survival*